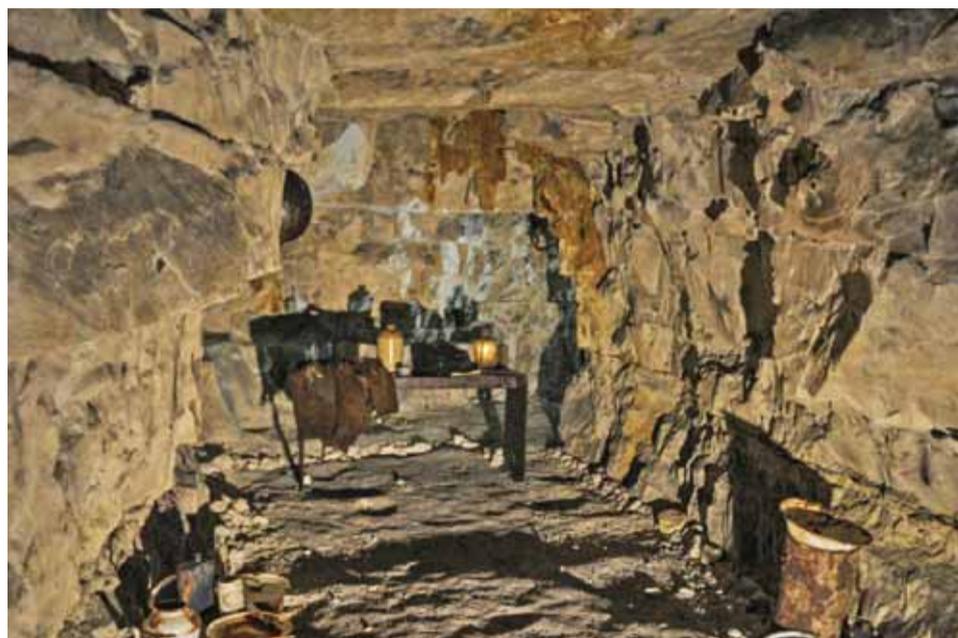




A photo taken on April 6, 2017 shows a memorial wall at the entrance to the underground museum Wellington Quarry (Carrière Wellington), part of many kilometers of tunnels dug by the British Army during WWII, in Arras. Some 24,000 soldiers of the British army emerged from these tunnels for a surprise offensive at dawn on April 9, 1917. — AFP photos



A photo taken on April 6, 2017 shows a reconstruction of a latrine in one of the tunnels of the underground museum Wellington Quarry.

# A CENTURY ON, CANADIANS DEBATE WWI BATTLE'S SIGNIFICANCE

**W**as it the birth of a nation or a national myth? The Battle of Vimy Ridge—fought in northern France a century ago and set to be commemorated on April 9—prompts heated debate about the importance of that Canadian chapter of World War I. The battle—which resulted in the retaking of a seven-kilometer (four-mile) long ridge from German forces—is considered a tipping point in the war.

“The battle of Vimy Ridge marked a turning point in the First World War and for Canada,” Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said last month. “For the first time, four Canadian Corps divisions composed of soldiers from every region of the country (fought) together on the same battlefield.” Most Canadians see it as a galvanizing development for national consciousness. “Many historians and writers consider the Canadian victory at Vimy a defining moment for Canada, when the country emerged from under the shadow of Britain and felt capable of greatness,” says Tim Cook, a historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. On April 9, 1917, an Easter Monday, 100,000 Canadian soldiers were mobilized on the seven-kilometer-wide front at the foot of the ridge.



A photo taken on April 6, 2017 shows portraits on display at the entrance to the underground museum Wellington Quarry.

Thirty thousand of them, artillerymen and infantrymen, seized the position after four days of combat. Nearly 3,600 were killed and more than 7,000 injured. But some consider the official view of the battle’s significance bunk. “Pure mythology,” says historian Michael Boire of the Royal Military College in

Kingston, Ontario. The former member of the army’s Black Watch regiment says the battle must be placed in context—without minimizing its real importance. It was neither decisive for the war’s outcome “nor the most fundamental” of battles fought by Canadians during the conflict, Boire says. Canada would gain political quasi-autonomy only in 1931. “The importance given to the Battle of Vimy is a post-war mythological construction,” he says, an “invention” dating back to 1967, the year of Canada’s centennial and the battle’s 50th anniversary.

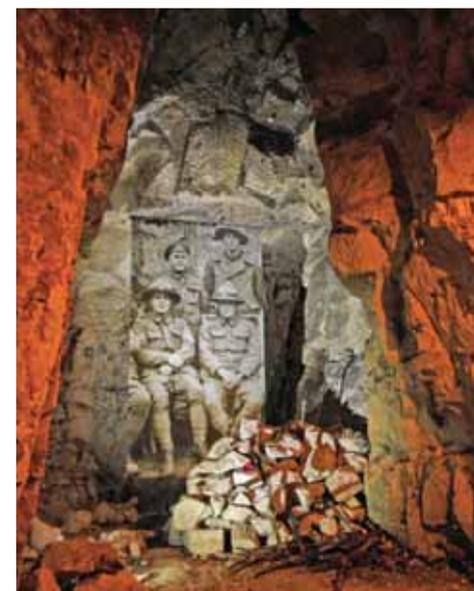
### ‘Like all others’

Vimy entered the realm of national legend in the 1980s, when a book about the battle by the author Pierre Berton sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The Canadian victory at Vimy is now considered a step toward Canada’s colonial emancipation from Britain. But Boire calls Berton’s narrative “a fabrication” not based on authentic research. The Canadians—integrated into the British Expeditionary Force—were commanded by a British officer, he says.

The national narrative also fails to mention that majority of soldiers in the battle were immigrants from the British Isles, he adds. Boire interviewed around 100 survivors of the

Vimy battle in the 1960s and 1970s. In their eyes, he says, the battle was “like all the others.” More important for those soldiers was the Battle of Saint-Julien in Belgium, where 18,000 Canadians successfully resisted the first German gas attacks in April 1915.

They also look to the Battle of Amiens on August 8, 1918, when Canadians and Australians “caused the collapse of the German army,” Boire says. “There was only one book (in Canada) written about Amiens and it was our biggest fight” of the war, he says. “Canadians do not like their history.” For most veterans, “there was no doubt in their minds” that the great Canadian memorial erected on Vimy Ridge between 1925 and 1936—dedicated to the memory of all the Canadian Expeditionary Force members who died in the war—“should have been established at Saint-Julien or at Amiens.” He puts down the decision of Vimy for the monument to a single major criterion: It had to be visible “from very far.” — AFP



A photo taken on April 6, 2017 shows a reconstruction of a latrine in one of the tunnels of the underground museum Wellington Quarry.

